

African Epic Discourse in Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma* (1956)

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Abstract

The present paper examines Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma* (1956) in relation to its author's cultural refinement within the theme of revolution where African Epic narrative forms and modernist mode of writing blend. More specifically, it analyses Kateb Yacine's novel characters as an interesting paradigm of intersection between experimental textual strategies and oral tradition of the African epic discourse. The Epic features come to sight through the author's shaping of the main characters as typically revolutionary.

الملخص

يبحث هذا المقال تمثيل التاريخ في رواية "نجمة" لكاتب يا سين. نظرا لارتباطها بالإطار السياسي الذي ولدت فيها في الخمسينات جعلت هذه الرواية تصور إعادة كتابة التاريخ من الخطاب الإفريقي الملحمي لوصف الإصابات التي بقيت في ذاكرة مؤلف استنادا على الذاكرة واستخدام الأسلوب الملحمي الأفريقي عبر شخصيات الرواية

Introduction

The present paper examines the African folk heroic tradition as a reflection of cultural refinement in Kateb's *Nedjma*. The novelist frames his narrative about an identity in a historical context where he faces multiple historical trajectories and cultural realities. He invokes different histories and appropriates myriad cultural bits and pieces to make sense of his present-day identity. Conversely, the present is also projected onto the past, in so far as the experience of a double identity makes it imperative to construct a past that justifies the state of the present. Kateb employs heroic creation to "cover cracks" in the basic structure of his culture, so that the ideal image of itself can be

projected as if it was actual. The relationship between differential identity as a function of culture building and heroic creation as a culture has been the element most often missing in discussions of Kateb's novel where heroic creation has the greatest interface with culture. The absence of a perception of this relationship has been particularly evident in the fact that characters in *Nedjma* have been seldom discussed as symbols of Algeria's cultural identities. To show how heroes of the novel are able of serving the culture refinement needs which is maintaining cultural identity and values, we shall focus our attention on the notion of 'the character-type', particularly, the way of undertaking actions which are defined within a model of heroism assuming that, at some point in the past, there existed an "heroic age" which established a set of heroic values and actions for all the time and all people. On this basis, we intend emphasize the way Kateb subverts the one-sided way of looking at the armed nationalist struggle in Algeria, and how he argues that, on the contrary, the revolution is war bound to yield positive results. The historical haggles over the Keblout heroes is of great interest to Kateb and such notions of heroism and poetic form are often cited as characteristics of the Epic, which offers a more personalized version of history because the motivations of great events are rooted in the desires and emotions of individuals. In his *Epic Traditions of Africa* (1999), Stephen Belcher reiterates that heroism is a culture bound concept and heroic creation is a process very much like culture refinement. Epics are products of a combination of social and historical circumstances and various verbal genres and heroes act with values-systems and narrative conventions. All of them are aspects of African oral tradition that might be called the building blocks of the epic tradition (1999: 14).

The relationship between Kateb's *Nedjma* to the African epic and heroic tradition can also be explained by the argument that one of the social functions of the intellectual (writer) is to "set the masses in motion"; the idea that a writer plays an important role in his society as "the voice of vision" in his own time as his writing extend not only into social realms, but also into the domain of engagement. The novel was written at crucial moments and the dilemmas of the historical meanings are the centre around which narrative revolves. The author

drew his novel's content from 8 May Uprising which led to the Algerian War for independence. His work remains bound up by representing the revolt as pivotal struggle in glorifying the memories of its participants. For Kateb, the conditions and heroic values of earlier age cannot only be operative, but also serve as "a guide" for future actions in the real life. However, to show folklore can be a reflection of the socio-cultural experiences of those who create it, we start by outlining the features which are common to African Epics and applicable for Kateb's *Nedjma*. In his discussion of the Arab Epic Tradition, Dwight.F.Reynolds, using the information mainly provided in Ibn Kaldoun's *Muqaddima* defines an epic as:

A poem or narrative which focuses upon individual heroes rather than corporatesocial units such as tribes and dynasties. It tells the birth of these heroes and their youthful exploits fighting battles and wooing beautiful maidens whom they bring back to the tribe as brides. The motives for their adventures are rooted in individual honor, glory, jealousy, lust, and retaliation. Its version constantly valorizes personal motives and characteristics of honor, love, and bravery over political maneuvering or power strategies. Epic retains a reflection of history that focuses on events and lessons that are relevant to its current audience, issues of ethical and personal behavior, perseverance against misfortune, and the preservation of one's honor. Written history narrates the rise and the fall of dynasties, the Epic describe the rise and fall of individual heroes (Dwight.F.Reynolds in Komstan.Raaflaub.2010:408).

The definition as well as the features provided by Dwight.F.Reynolds can be useful to better understand the colonial background, one whose most defining characteristics are the Setif Uprising in 1945 that was followed by the Algerian Liberation War for independence in 1954. However, Kateb's innovative perspective is not derived only from his direct involvements in his country's struggle for independence, but it is also generated from his ideological standpoints. His *Nedjma* was published in 1956 and is based on an episode of Algerian history. It tells about four characters caught in an inescapable sphere of violence. Rachid, Lakhdar, Mustapha and Mourad live in Bône. Nedjma, Kamal's wife, the daughter of a French

woman born out of wedlock, obsesses all of them. The novel is also a narrative of an intra-clan conflict against the background of violence and disunity inherent in Algerian society under French domination and colonial rule. Therefore, *Nedjma* cannot be understood on its own. Rather, the full meaning of novel emerges in relation to the historical and cultural contexts in which it was written and which its author tries to represent. The overlapping discourses of violence highlight tensions between the personal and political and between individual and the community. These interpositions constitute the novels' main narrative strategy. The language borrowed from historic violence accounts for the mixture of individual experiences of violence within collective trauma. Kateb produces an accessible revolutionary text glorifying the nation's heroes, displaying how revolutionary and reconstructive practices can be seen as an attempt to exercise control over the various mechanisms of power. The specific manner in which Kateb elevates his peoples' struggle for independence to an "epic narrative" helps to make apparent the revolutionary nationalistic overtones inherent in the novelist's discourse. The importance and reappearance of 'revolution' in the narrative also reflects the way Kateb turns a 'revolt' into "an epic revolution". By 'epic', I mean, quite simply, how the writer employs certain particular kinds of heroic behaviors that have been characterized as epic over centuries.

But before, there are two questions we shall address and to which we try to respond. First, what are the main factors which contribute to shape Kateb's *Nedjma* epic narrative? And what type of revolution is fore grounded in the text? Some provisional answers are not hard to come by because the novel cannot be divorced from the colonial moment in which it came into being. The recurrence and the importance given to the theme of revolution, as indicated earlier, stem from Kateb's firsthand experience of war and the immense suffering resulting from it. To a query about the reappearance and importance of revolution in his literary works, Kateb replies in one of his interviews, saying: "Nous avons vécu un cataclysme, une révolution, ce n'est pas rien et c'est ce que j'écris"(Awal.1992: 88).

Kateb's youthful years coincided with Algeria's intense struggle for liberation from oppressive French rule. The author grew up in the

midst of that turbulent phase and his bitter and painful immediate experience of the 8 May Rebellion of 1945 had a profound effect on his imagination. He was expelled from school because of his involvement in the uprising, was arrested and caned by the police for participating in the riots, and was jailed for a brief period by the colonial authorities. During his stay in prison, his mother became insane because she thought that her son has been killed. Kateb, then, was in touch and had an intimate understanding of the central events narrated in his novel. *Nedjma*, then, reflects that bitter reality and provides a realistic picture of the Algerian resistance against French domination. Its central action revolves around the war, making the novel a narrative of revolution. The next place to search for the factors that shape the revolution in Kateb's novel is his ideological standpoint. His militancy was due mainly to his interaction with poor militant workers and Dockers. During the Algerian Liberation War, he was sympathetic to the Communist Party and had also a great admiration for the Vietnamese people. His respect, consideration and friendship for Ho Chi Minh, motivated him to write *L'Homme aux sandales de Caoutchouc* in 1970. The author also expressed a great respect for Communist leaders such as Marx, Lenin, Mao and Stalin. In his literary outlook, Kateb's Marxist militancy started with the articles and poems he wrote in 1950s. Among them, « La chanson d'amour pour la fille des prolétaires », « Aux mains durcies au service du capital ». Other poems were dedicated to Nazim Hikmet, "Le poète de l'internationale socialiste". In addition, Kateb's Marxism reoccurs in his plays, which deal with the workers and their struggle for a better life. The writer, then, shares an interest in the theme of revolution and wished to experiment with it as a mode of expression. He deals with the psychological damage that colonialism had on his countrymen. What appears in the narrative is that Kateb explains human suffering in terms of social, political and psychological factors. He reflects the highly wrought emotional atmosphere of the war years and also conveys with special intensity, the internal conflicts, tensions and terror, which are the fundamental elements of a revolution.

Before beginning to look closely at the revolutionary features which may be found in the novel, it is worth taking the time to establish, first of all, what it is meant by revolution in the context of our study. The very term 'Revolution' is a vague concept that changes over time. Its meaning is variously understood or intended, depending upon the shift from one context to another, from one period to another, and from one theorist to another. An explanation of the word 'revolution' which can be applied to our analysis of Kateb's novel is provided in Daniel Moran's *Wars of National Liberation* (2001). Moran's definition matches Kateb's vision of revolution in the sense that the theorist maintains that wars for national liberation are frequently represented as episodes of spontaneous combustion produced by pervasive misery and injustice. Yet, adds Moran, the opposite dynamic is equally apparent. Revolution can be a product of war waged by a committed vanguard whose outlook does not command widespread support at the start, and who may obtain only grudging acquiescence at the end. The use of violence, suggests Moran, is a frequent aspect to any revolution or for a war for national liberation. The violence occurring in the past revolutionary period cannot be regarded as the only foundation upon which the perception of heroism and its age is built, that perception also looks at the particular spiritual universe of the combatants, who are seen as the disrupters of constricting and limiting forces. The adherents of any revolution, concludes Moran, are responsible as individuals for breaking an obstruction that had previously curbed their energy and restricted their choices (Moran.2001: 26). More significantly, in his analysis devoted to the Algerian Liberation War, Moran maintains that the Setif Uprising was an important step in the progress of Algerian nationalism because it was from it that would grow the F.L.N militants committed to direct action, which would make the Algerian revolution (P.103). The climate of violence and terror was fostered by economic hardships, brought by population pressure, the concentration of landownership in the foreign settlers' hands and the general deterioration of material conditions resulting from the Two World Wars (P.104).

The two definitions accord well with the revolution described in *Nedjma* as the novel's crucial events elucidate the dilemmas of a society under colonial rule. Kateb considers colonialism as the root cause of poverty and abjection which characterized his community and considers that the violence inherent in the colonial oppression created the conditions for militant resistance and revolution. In *Nedjma*, Kateb foregrounds the dehumanising process of the colonial system through the way he shapes his characters. The process resembles the violence and horror which the colonial French regime inflicted on his countrymen. On this basis, the author peoples his novel with a group of revolutionary characters who cooperate to bring a cessation of French oppression and injustice. They seek by all means, including violence, to dismantle the colonial apparatus that dominated their country for a long time.

Having explained what a revolution is, the question which poses itself is how Kateb combines social, historical circumstances and various verbal genres. The answer will be provided by examining the African folk heroic tradition as a reflection of cultural values grounded in the author's cultural experience. In his discussion of the Black folk hero, John.W.Roberts points out that the embodiment of the exploits of a particular figure in folk heroic literature is not designed to provide a model of adoptive behaviour in a literal sense. Rather folk heroic literature offers a conception of attitudes and actions that a group perceives as the most advantageous for maintaining and protecting its identity in the face of a threat to values guiding actions. Folk heroic literature always portrays the exceptional actor whose exploits offer the group a glimpse of its own possibilities in handling similar situations in everyday life and specific situations.

A group for which culture-building proceeds through warlike confrontations would be more likely to conceptualize an individual as heroic who selects war-like actions and displays a warlike personality in the face of any threat to group values. Roberts adds that folk heroic creation as an emergent process is a way by which cultural groups attempt to facilitate adherence to group values during periods of intense change (W.Roberts. 1989: 6).

In *Nedjma*, the use of the African folk hero tradition is an expressive embodiment of its author's ambiguous situation of an African brought about in that instance by conditions which forced him to accept an identity as inferior and dependent beings in the colonial system. For the author, both cultural transformation and folk heroic creation become almost inevitable as he seeks under indirectly adverse conditions to maintain his identity and values through cultural enhancement. Moreover, to maintain and enhance reconcilability as African people transformed their historically severed cultural patterns and forms to develop a cultural response to colonialism and the obstacles that it created. Thus, the folklore of heroism created by Kateb reflects the values of a people who do not have their roots in Western tradition either historically or culturally, even though behaviours which reflect Western values had a profound and incessant impact on him. The creative responses of Kateb to such an impact facilitated rather than inhibiting his maintenance of a value orientation and aesthetic tradition deeply rooted in the African cultural heritage. The heroes in Kateb's novel reflect and reveal the colonized feelings of rebelliousness against the values of the colonial system which denied opportunities for their self-definition.

1-Heroic Features in the Novel

The revolutionary aura that prevails in Kateb's *Nedjma* is suggested by the revolutionary temper, engagement, and resistance of the protagonists. In the course of the tale, the awakening of national consciousness evolves with the growth to maturity of the different characters. What makes the author's depiction of the revolution heroic is without doubt the yearning of the characters for liberation, references to the countless individual heroic acts performed and lives sacrificed, every one of which deserves to be memorized and glorified in an epic manner. The African epic as a narrative form, as John.W.Roberts points out, is not necessarily centred on the deeds of one hero who is always the driving force behind the action. Although the epic is developed around the heroic career of a central heroic figure, the actions of other figures aid in clarifying the message of the epic and the historical and cultural information that it contains. African epics celebrate the deeds of war heroes and served as more

than an expressive vehicle for transmitting the exploits of these figures. An epic frequently includes genealogies of the ruling groups, collapsed with methodological material pertaining to the origin of the world and the like. The strength of culture is fully reflected in the exploits of its epic hero who serves an emergent function perceived as important to culture-building [...] The epic hero can be considered as the official “protector” of his culture; he reinforces and validates the moral values and offers African groups an important model of behavior for protecting themselves from threats to their survival and well-being by acting to enhance their collective power. In clinging tenaciously to the values guiding actions recognized by the group, and in essence, living up to their own image of themselves. In the end, Africans celebrate the superiority of their values and identity in epic which allows them to survive and prosper under the most destructive conditions that human beings can create (J.W.Roberts.1989: 124-131).

Kateb, like African bards, turns to his African heritage for an expressive model to convey a conception of a folk hero to reveal a moral quality and preserve a sense of balance between the actions of his protagonists and the values of his society which he makes essential to a complete understanding of the meaning and function of heroic epic narration. His attribution of power to his main characters reflects the undeviating influence of the values associated with African heroic tale and epic tradition on the heroic action. Kateb creates a model of behavior to protect his identity and values from the threat posed by the actions of the colonizer. The epic and heroic tradition provided by J.W.Robert's fits the young heroes of the novel with a focus for celebrating their past heroic history and refining his culture. He celebrates the actions of epic heroes as symbolic of the “ideal forms of behavior” reflecting their values and identity and reflect them in both their historical and emergent dimensions. Kateb's *Nedjma* narrates the grandeur of the Algerians' resistance and their fighting against foreign forces of exploitation and domination. The nationalist agenda of Kateb's characters appear in their solidarity to overcome oppression as they come face to face with the colonial forces. He foregrounds mainly the emergence of resistance and celebrates the deeds of violent insurrections through memories of its legendary warriors. In *Nedjma*,

the memorable and rebellious characters who people Kateb's novel are all trying to understand themselves as human beings in a time of crisis. Among the numerous characters, the most important ones are Lakhdar, Nedjma, Mourad, Mustapha and Rachid. Many indications point to the fact that they are idealised symbols. They also stand for their countrymen's longing for liberation and freedom. Lakhdar, Mustapha, Mourad and Rachid can be linked in terms of their common scorn for colonialism and their discontent towards the existing oppressive colonial order which seems to bear all the injustices that characterised the colonial period. These characters are conceived as prototypical figures of resistance in a struggle for political and cultural determination.

2- Revolutionary Characters in *Nedjma*

In his *The Hero in the African Epic*, Joseph Mbele tracks the various features that shape an epic hero in the African context. The hero is central to the epic and acts as a focal point for change. Whether he existed or not, he becomes emblematic of change, the agent who revitalises the people as they carry the images of past experiences and conquest into a new world. He is part of both realms and he would be able to take his people within him if he were not identifiably a part of the cultural past. He has a vision of the new world even if he dies in the process of realizing it. Mbele maintains that the action of the epic shows the ideals of the individual. Through such values, as evidenced by the great hero, the requisite courage and fighting skill in the battles with direct action describing heroic behaviour in the service of nationalism. An epic hero, as Mbele sees it, is an individual of a particular incident, which means that he or she intervenes in some critical situations in an extraordinary fashion, acting outside, above, or with disregard to normal patterns of behaviour, especially in putting his life at risk. An epic hero is devoted to combat and confrontation. He is a risk taker and is prepared to seek out the aspects of the quest involving strategies, threats and violence. He should display courage, cunning, wisdom, strength, determination, faith, love, compassion, and many other traits to answer the challenges which he meets in the course of his quest. His fall comes not because of his personal flaws but because he is related in a symbiotic relationship to a weaker partner, whose death

affects or drains away some of the supreme prowess of the stronger figures (Mbele. 1986:15- 26)

The determining action of *Nedjma* can be linked to the abovementioned epic features by which Kateb manipulates history to serve his ideological purpose in presenting the Algerian waves of revolts as a model of heroism and resistance. From the very title of the novel, *Nedjma* is a revolutionary cry of defiance, an affirmation of existence, and accusation of the oppressor that is depicted as a compelling force in the actions of the protagonists as well as in the themes of novels. Kateb is engaged in the recuperation of the epic to accommodate his revolutionary vision of the Algerian War for Independence. He does not only favor rebellion towards the colonial system, but also praises his people's revolts and celebrates their communal resistance through his reference to L'Emir Abdelkader and his followers who fought long and well. Abdelkader is described as 'Algeria's most renewed nation builder' and a military and socio-organizational genius. He epitomizes ancestors and warriors. Kateb praises the frequency and magnitude of Abdelkader's revolt and regards it as one of the most important instances of tribally rooted resistance to the French conquest. Abdelkader forged a confederation of several tribal groups, led the tribal warriors and fought with surprise attacks. Though he and his companions failed, they remained a model of heroic collective resistance. Though French soldiers put into custody the leader thinking to mark an end to the war, but his arrest was followed by unrest and other uprisings. It proved that his detention and exile, by no means, led to the pacification of Algeria. Through Abdelkader and other ancestors, Kateb suggests that heroes of the past have transcended mortality to become God-like heroes and are traditionally believed to participate in the military affairs of the living. Their presence reinforces the nationalist of an unbroken chain of resistance to colonial rule. Kateb's interest in the communal aspect of the rebellion is magnified as follows:

Le peuple était partout, à tel point qu'il devenait invisible, mêlé aux arbres, à la poussière, et son seul mugissement flottait jusqu'à moi; pour la première, comme à Sétif, je me rendais compte que le

peuple peut faire peur [...] Et la foule se mit à mugir. Attendre quoi ? Le village est à nous (P.56).

The passage describes the revolutionary atmosphere of the novel which is set in the period before the Second World War and Kateb employs a tremendous quantity of historical details, which are fused with the historical material concerning the 8 May 1945 uprising. In order to understand fully the first outburst of Algerian nationalist revolution, reference to the 1 May 1945, seems important. During that day, many nationalist leaders resolved to mark the approaching liberation of Europe with demonstrations and claimed their own liberation. Meanwhile, the Friends of the Algerian Manifesto (AML), organized demonstrations in twenty-one towns across the country to support the claim and to ask for the freedom of Messali Hadj, the leader of the Algerian People's Party (PPA). They mainly required the recognition of their right to independence after having contributed to the defeat of Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The demonstrations led to the eruption of violence in some localities, including Algiers and Oran, leaving four casualties and dozens of injured that day. (Harbi.1980: 29). To Kateb, that historical moment was so familiar and provides a clear example of the fact that history is shaped by the struggle of ordinary people against their oppressors. It became for him, without doubt, a source of inspiration. In *Nedjma*, he stresses the continuity of the struggle and shows the power and the will of the Algerians to end with oppression. The subsequent sentence is a telling example: "la répression, loin de briser l'élan populaire, ne fera que le pousser dans la voie d'une lutte encore plus déterminée et plus consciente" (Abdoun. 1983: 40). Kateb dramatizes the events through the intervention of several representative characters that embody the different attitudes to that historical situation. Each move is interpreted in relation to the great mythical or actual heroes of the past. The names of figures such as Abdelkader, Jughurtha are sufficient enough to evoke glorious past struggles. In the fifth part of *Nedjma*, Kateb provides a complete depiction of the 8 May revolt, starting from the eruption of violence with "le Porte drapeau s'écroule" to Mustapha's grandfather, "vieux montagnard debout sur sa mule, qui tira sur les gendarmes" (P.56). He also refers to the ruthless

outcomes of the revolt in the days following the uprising. The writer reports similar situations and happenings such as imprisonment, torture, and death (P.118), which Jacqueline Arnaud, Kateb's biographer, considers as "la force de vérité" (Arnaud.1985: 208). As mentioned earlier, the young Kateb was shocked by the violence used by the French police and was very affected by the number of people killed during that period of troubles. The dramatic circumstances of the event are narrated in Mustapha's diary (P.83). Towards the end of the narrative, Kateb refers to a well-known nationalist figure, L'Emir Abdelkader, who played a central role in the struggle for independence; he recalls how he and his followers set out as young men to join in the 1871 rebellion. The author regards it as the most revered of the uprisings in Algerian history and summons up the heroic deeds of that heroic figure in his conference entitled: "L'Emir Abdelkader et l'indépendance d'Algérie"(1947). On the basis of this, Kateb fills *Nedjma* with a group of representative characters coming from different social layers which make up Algerian society and makes them, at the same time, members of a single community. Even the secondary characters in *Nedjma* are defined largely through the kindness, generosity, and the support they provide to others in time of need.

However, the character who is endowed with many epic features is Lakhdar. The different aspects selected for his presentation shape him as a leader contesting a colonial mentality in all its aspects. He seems to embody Mbele's three sources of what he calls an epic grandeur: the hero's attitude towards his mortality; his relation to the community; and the dual dimension of time and space. All of these features apply to Lakhdar who is tied to the history of his country's resistance. All of the elements enumerated in my discussion of Mbele's conception of an epic hero are relevant to Lakhdar's childhood, his arrest, and torture in prison (P.54). Kateb's main character, Lakhdar is fully engaged in his country's liberation war and is extensively involved in the revolt by taking part in the 8 May uprising. Through his participation in the revolt, he remains faithful to his ideals and stands as an expression of the respective moralities of struggle against colonialism and all forms of domination. The

nationalist commitment of Lakhdar appears in the narrative through his rejection of colonial education from which he was excluded because of his participation in the 8 May demonstrations (P.52). He experiences prison twice; the first time, he was jailed as a troublemaker because of his participation in the 8 May revolt; the second time, he was arrested for hitting back against the violence of his foreman, Mr Ernest (P.50). In addition to this, Lakhdar's torture, and his undergoing of some degrading and inhuman punishments stand for the colonial oppression (P.60). Analogous to some epic heroes, right from the beginning of the novel, Lakhdar emerges as man who is impelled by a noble ideal, that of giving his people their lost sense of identity, and a distinct cultural personality (P.11). He is also conceived as an admirable leader and organiser (P.12). He is committed to the liberation of his country and is convinced that only blood sacrifice can redeem it. Kateb's main protagonist, Lakhdar fights to preserve something greater than himself, he opposes with vehemence the situation in which he finds himself. He does not accept his fate meekly and he cries against oppression and has consented to sacrifice his life so that others may derive joy from a free life. Ismail Abdoun is right in writing that Kateb describes the Algerian revolt in a patriotic manner that comes to sight through the way he shapes his main characters. The narrative is centered on the 8th of May 1945 which is a repetition of the 1st November 1954 and the radical claim of Algerian independence that is explicitly stated in the novel. The Algerian identity denied by French colonialism is clearly affirmed with force through the evocation of legendary heroes who symbolize the millennium struggle of the Algerian people against the various invaders. For the reviewer, Kateb reverses the relations of domination between colonizer and colonized subjects by the power he grants to Lakhdar and Mustapha in front of their French classmates when they were young and later on during the demonstration of May 1945. For the critic, at an early age, the two characters challenge the colonial power and their behaviour announces their rebellious temperament as adults; their early insurgence is summarized in what follows:

Lakhdar et Mustapha sont les premiers en classe, s'accaparent les fillettes et s'octroient les plus hauts grades dans le jeu de guerre. Ce

sont des généraux incontestés d'une armée de petit Français qu'ils malmènent à leur gré. La violence de Lakhdar en particulier frôle déjà la dissidence et la révolte (Abdoun.2006: 141).

More significantly, Kateb links the revolt of the characters to the history of the Numidia and North Africa that he elevates to a legendary dimension which comes to sight through his description of the challenging cities of Bone and Constantine. Though ruined by the different invasions, they stand as reminders of the glorious past of its renowned leaders' struggle against the different colonizers. Moreover, Lakhdar's heroism is evidenced in his unquestionable commitment and self-sacrifice. The magnitude of Lakhdar's commitment to liberate his country appears clearly in the following prose verse: Je suis parti avec les tracts/Je les ai enterré dans la rivière/J'ai tracé sur le sable un plan de manifestation futur/Qu'on me donne cette rivière, et je me battrai/Je me battrai avec du sable et de l'eau/De l'eau fraîche, du sable chaud. Je me battrai/J'étais décidé. Je voyais donc loin. Très loin (P.54). This excerpt embodies the revolutionary rhetoric that accompanies Lakhdar's desire to rise and overthrow the unjust colonial masters; it also demonstrates his conviction that a simple reform will not suffice to empower people and incite them to get rid of colonialism. Therefore, his thoughts account for the social and political conditions, which prevailed in Algeria during World War II. The period of history was associated with the rise of discontent and the characters are located within that form of atmosphere loaded with violence. They reveal the conflict between the colonised and the coloniser and their personal events have political parallels and implications. For instance, Lakhdar's revolutionary temper can be equated with the determination of Kateb's generation to free themselves from colonial domination during and after the Second World War. Lakhdar participates in the demonstration, is imprisoned and tortured like Kateb and some of his friends. His commitment produces admiration and reminds the reader of what Georg Lukàcs calls "typical characters" because they are typical of the historical situation of their classes and are presented as being bound up in a general dialectical movement of history (Lukàcs.1971:67).

More importantly, Lakhdar's desperate yearnings and striving for freedom and dignity are the same yearning embodied in that of his countrymen. He longs for a bright future horizon and hopes to be free. It is in this double representation that Lakhdar's complicated journey becomes symbolic. What he seeks is also what the community gropes for but is unable to achieve. The character decides to embrace his loss and death as the enabling condition for a new identity, but at the end of the story, he comes to realize that there is no identity outside the locus of the community. He is certainly exemplary and example of figures able to undergo profound self-transformations and to forge his own individual identity under difficult circumstances. He stands for historical personalities who led effective military resistance against Africa's invaders; his military invincibility and his past achievements are appraised and are designed to inspire confidence in the African peoples. The delineation of such noble models is also part of the epic and African praise discourse that Kateb uses in his novel. It is important to note that heroism, a main feature of an epic revolution, is also embodied in the way Kateb shapes some of his other main characters. As Lakhdar, Mourad, Rachid, and Nedjma, each in his way, dare to defy all powers that be, challenge authority, and all contribute to convey a picture of revolution. For instance, Mourad and Rachid think that liberty can only be made real through action and concrete achievement (P.28). They take part in revolutionary activity to escape from the hell in which they live. All of them are united by an unmistakable assertion of solidarity around common values such as justice and liberty (P.39). For instance, Rachid fights to change the political conditions. He refuses to submit to the colonial regime. He becomes an outlaw as he deserts the French army and he is wanted by the police (P.36). He prefers imprisonment to submission to colonial orders (P.179). The other character that rebels against the coloniser's oppression is Mourad; one of his significant acts of heroism occurs when he intervenes to rescue the Arab servant from a beating by Mr Ricard (P.28). Kateb's insertion of Mourad's violent reaction embodies a discourse that resembles the one developed in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. Mourad's will to sweep aside the oppression of Ricard by forceful reaction equals Fanon's description of the violence

done to the native psyche by colonialism. Such violence suggests Fanon, is itself responsible for encouraging a complex of inferiority. The criminality, the impulsiveness, and the violence of his murders are, therefore, not the consequence of the organization of his nervous system or his originating character, but the direct product of the dreadful and oppressive colonial system which alienates him and makes him hate himself (Fanon.1965: 67).

Indeed, the violent behavior of Mourad is no more than a logical reaction to that of his French boss, Ricard. When faced with Ricard's abuse of the servant, Mourad has no other means but to hit back. The unjust and dreadful behavior of the French character, Ricard, creates in Mourad the will to violence which compels the former to kill the latter on the day of his marriage. It is important to note that Mourad does not embrace and prize violence per se, he rather sees it as necessary to depose colonial rule and end its oppression. Likewise, Fanon, to remember, used the term revolution through violence in reply to the atrocities and violent repressions he witnessed during the Algerian war. For him, colonialism means violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence (Fanon.1965:37). Therefore, the only way to get rid of colonial violence is through counter-violence. In his *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression* (1985), Hussein Abdelahi Bulhan is to the point when he explains that, according to Fanon, the practice of counter-violence fosters cohesion among the oppressed, purges their complexes, and rehabilitates the alienated. In short, the revolutionary counter-violence of the oppressed brings forth a new language, a new people, and a new humanity (Bulhan.1985:117).

Along very similar lines, Mourad's deliberate killing of Ricard in his own house the day of his wedding is also interpreted as a means of destroying the illusion that white men are not vulnerable. Mohamed Lakhdar Maougal emphasizes the intertextuality of Kateb's description with Albert Camus. Mourad's murder, according to Maougal, is nothing but an answer to Albert Camus's *L'étranger* where Meursault kills an unknown Arab on a beach in Algiers in 1942 (Maougal. 2004:46).

In addition to the defiant male characters, Kateb presents the rebellion of his main female character, Nedjma, in an implicit way. The character would on a superficial reading seem to be voiceless, passive and obedient, but a careful reader will not fail to notice, on the contrary, the rebellious temper of the character. Though she does not appear frequently in the narrative, she never disappears from the centre of the action. Nedjma is conceived as an attractive and elusive person wishing to enslave men. She is “une femme faite d’adversité”, “une fleur irrespirable”, “une étoile de sang jaillie du meurtre”, and “l’ogresse qui mourut de faim après avoir mangé ses trois frères” (P.169). She causes the loss and ruin of every person who dares approach her because she is the generator of conflicts, rivalries and hate between the four protagonists and becomes the target of jealousy and envy. First, Nedjma engages in an adventurous relationship with Lakhdar while her husband Kamel is on the way to Constantine to see his sick mother (P.232). She is the main cause of Rachid’s instability and wandering, “La fille de ma propre tribu que je poursuivais instinctivement de ville en ville”, confesses Rachid to the public writer (P.167). Therefore, the possession of Nedjma is doomed to failure. Even her recuperation by the tribe is achieved through the murder of Si Mokhtar, presumably her father. At the symbolic level, Nedjma is given ultra dimensions of inaccessibility and independence. She indicates colonial connection, but emerges as a catalyst for a nation too. She defies stories of pure genealogy of ancestry while she offers new images of self-sufficiency and independence. She combines in her character the real and symbolic. She is beyond the reach of specific person, but she lives and exists in the minds of all. Nedjma’s challenge to her lovers as well as her resistance echo that of the Berber queen, Kahina, who, it was told was a symbol of age-old resistance and a marker of national syncretism as she resisted the Arab

conquest. In addition to praise names, Kateb also refers to cities and names of towns such as Constantine, Bone and Carthage to give a sense of the strong metaphysical attachment people have to their places of origins, no matter how long they may have lived elsewhere. The names, in the context of the novel, do not appear as belonging to separate African groups; rather they serve as deep structural and inspirational symbols of racial and cultural affiliation, glory, and continuity. Kateb uses the towns as metaphors particularizing African culture that draws upon visions of an African ancestry. For instance, Rachid is forced by the colonial oppression to dwell in a land far away from his origins. Therefore, he imaginatively, particularizes the name of places and cities in order to authenticate his identity.

To sum up, Kateb's characters reveal that the author shows a preference for a group representative characters whose attitudes to the colonial system are strikingly similar to fragments cited in African Epics as they come down in oral tradition. By retelling the stories, praising feats of bygone heroes, the author uses their heroic aspect as a focal point to trace the rise of anti-colonial resistance in his colonised society. The novel is then presented as a sort of a web, linking the private lives of the various characters to historical events and vice-versa. He shows how colonial domination and oppression shape people's lives in bringing to the surface their strengths and weaknesses. His characters are depicted as individuals with distinctive characteristics and personal stories, but they are also representatives of large social and historical situations. This conception of character is reminiscent of Georg Lukàcs's notion of "typicality". The argument is that protagonists in effective and eminently realist novels achieve their connection between public and private realms essentially through the technique of "typicality", that is by the creation of characters who are distinct individuals and "typical" representatives of large historical

forces (Lukàcs.1971:67). Lukàcs's argument is particularly relevant to the way in which Kateb carefully connects the large public events of his narrative with the private experiences of specific individuals. This is done by interweaving the life histories of individual characters from a variety of backgrounds with one another and with the history of Algeria. However, it is important to notice that Kateb's allusion to the past is not just an evocation of it, but a distancing from the colonial history that teaches that those who started the resistance to colonialism invented their nationalism in colonial schools, not by emulating the resistance of their ancestors. In the novel, the historical personalities who led the most stubborn and effective military resistance efforts against the French colonial presence in Africa can be linked to Edward Said who maintains that for the liberation and nationalist fighters, leading the struggle against European power, legitimacy depends on their asserting an unbroken continuity leading to the first warriors who stood against the intrusive white man (Said.1993:193). In this regard, Kateb's *Nedjma* is a colossal achievement in every sense. It contains a seemingly endless parade of striking images, vivid details about Algeria's history of revolution. Such images and details are reminiscent of African tribal narratives interspersed with poems, or a full-fledged epic with characters that seem mythical and larger than life precisely because they are so rooted in real life. The same figures contribute to convey the historical and epic discourses of the author in *Nedjma*.

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